# Jelly Birds

Another year of late ice-out on the Chippewa National Forest, my better half and I spent some time while the ice was breaking up with a little tour of lakes, just to see what was doing. The logger says that critters help us to get a grip on this old earth, and I couldn't agree more. Perhaps you are interested in some highlights of what can be seen on the Forest, arranged in sort of a numerical fashion.

- Hundreds of coots and ring-necked ducks, on one of the Chippewa's waterfowl impoundments. Most large lakes were as yet ice-covered, and so this little bit of open water must have been pretty inviting to the migrating birds.
- Two thousand walleyes in the DNR's nets at Cutfoot, part of the egg stripping operation. This was the count of fish just at the time I happened to stop in. For me another intriguing part of that story were the 70 interested pelicans, and 1 determined DNR guy with a sling shot. I wonder how that worked out.
- Twenty-nine bald eagles, on a tiny lake that was about half ice, half open water. The lake must have winter-killed, and 27 of the eagles were standing around on the ice. Evidently these opportunists do not mind their fish a little on the mushy side.
- A few porcupines scattered here and there, munching on buds out at the ends of some pretty small tree branches. No wonder they fall so often.
- Three wolves travelling abreast, down the middle of the Mud Lake road.
- One eagle that caused me to really hit my brakes (even though I was driving pretty slowly), as it swooped down, across the road in front of my truck, grabbed a foot-full of nesting material from the ditch, and made its way back towards its nest.

And now, although it is late compared to most recent years, the leaves are finally beginning to show themselves on the Chippewa National Forest. Wet places have become yellow with the blooming of the cowslips, and birds are arriving in mass. For the gardeners among us, it's an opportunity to turn our attentions to that which arises from the earth.

One of the most charming gardens I know belongs to my mother. Situated lake-side, Mom describes weeding as alternating between pulling those plants that are unwanted, and gazing out across the water. Having spent some time in her garden, I know what she means. It is a remarkably beautiful and peaceful spot. Far from quiet, what makes the whole thing particularly special is the incredible bird life that focuses on this little patch of ground. It's a dynamic scene, with the players continually changing. This time of year you can pick up a number of warblers in the hardwoods that ring the lake, rejoice in the loon calls that echo across the water, and there is

the virtually nonstop activity of a thriving purple martin colony. But for shear entertainment value, you ought to pause a while to take note of the orioles.

Strikingly colored in their orange and black outfits, the Baltimore (or Northern) Oriole is a highly adaptable species that lives well in proximity to people. Mature males are the brightest colored; young males and females are lighter shades. This species was historically a bird of woodland edges and open riparian edges, and you can still them in those places, but they also do well in areas with more scattered trees, so they are seen in towns and parks.

One of the fun aspects to orioles is that you can lure them in to feeders. Orioles eat a variety of foods, and their diet consists mainly of caterpillars, beetles, and the like. But they also eat fruit and nectar, particularly in the spring and fall. These sugary foods readily convert to the fat that fuels migration. These birds winter in Central America. Their interest in fruit and nectar is what can draw them into your feeders. My mother puts out inexpensive grape jelly and enjoys the birds for a few, short weeks before the protein demands of feeding nestlings causes them to focus more on insect foods. But during the time that they are Jelly Birds, you can watch a procession of orioles come and go from your feeder, with all of the squabbling and chattering that such circumstances encourage. It is interesting to note that unlike many other fruit-eating birds, orioles go for the ripest, darker-colored fruit.

Male orioles arrive on the breeding grounds first, with the mature males arriving the very earliest. These are quickly followed by the younger males, and then the females. The mature males immediately begin defending territories, and it is said that the females are courted vigorously upon their arrival. Nest construction begins in just days after their return to the breeding grounds. Before the females arrive, the males sing almost constantly in the mornings. After they pair up, the males sing much less often.

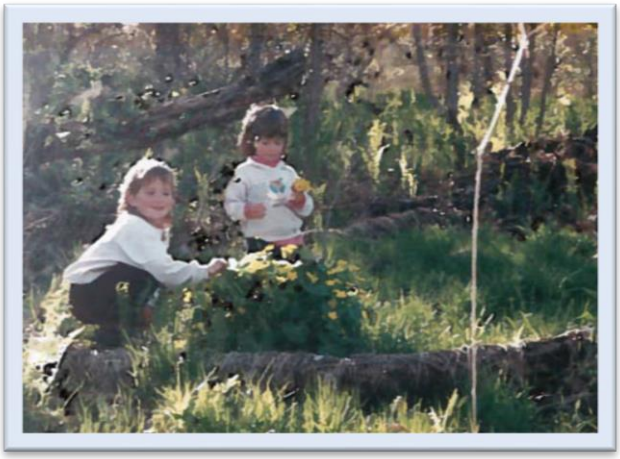
Orioles make a variety of noises, with the “chatter call” being a distinctive crabby sort of chattering that is made when the birds have issues with each other. The birds also chatter at people when they intrude into their territory. I have noticed they chatter at me when I sit too near the feeder.

To see an oriole’s nest, you must look high up in taller trees. American elm trees were once an important place for this bird to nest. The nest is distinctively gourd-shaped, with a pendulous, hanging appearance. Your chances of seeing such nests are best when the leaves are off the trees. Look near the tips of the outer tree branches.

Although orioles are less sensitive than are many bird species to the effects of human society, one cautionary note concerns the use of insecticides. Spraying of trees in summer not only removes potential food sources, but also has been observed to directly poison orioles.

On a happier note, I have seen as many as six orioles at my mother's feeder at one time. I always thought that a substantial number, as for many years I have had exactly zero orioles at my house. But then a funny thing happened this spring. After returning home from a visit to my folks', I noticed an oriole high up in one of the big spruce trees around my house. Perhaps by chance or maybe because my old grey cat did not make it through this winter, the bird seemed to hang around. A couple days went by, and I caught sight of it departing one of the hummingbird feeders.

Eventually, I noticed that some of the bee guards had been pulled off one of the feeders, no doubt by a hungry oriole in search of nectar. That is when it occurred to me that I ought to make a better offering. From the back of the cupboard I retrieved a jar of grape jelly with the vintage date of 2006 on it. Older than jelly I want to eat, I put several large spoonful's of it in a basket that I hung near the hummingbird feeder, and within days there developed a rather long lineup of orioles working that basket. I don't know exactly how many of them there are, because it seems to increase on a daily basis, but so far we have counted no fewer than 9 Jelly Birds at my house. Who would have thought?



by Kelly Barrett, Wildlife Biologist
Chippewa National Forest